

Ecological attributes of strategic land acquisitions for addition to Victoria's public protected area estate (2006-2007)

James A Fitzsimons^{1,2,3}, Cameron Williams¹, Vanessa Walsh¹,
Paul FitzSimons¹ and Geoff U'Ren⁴

¹Parks and Protected Areas unit, Department of Sustainability and Environment,
Level 2, 8 Nicholson Street, East Melbourne Victoria 3002

²School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University,
221 Burwood Highway, Burwood Victoria 3125

³Current address: The Nature Conservancy, Suite 3.04, 60 Leicester Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053

⁴Department of Sustainability and Environment, Locked Bag 3000, Box Hill Victoria 3128

Abstract

The development of a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system is the key objective of the National Reserve System, and is supported by all Australian States and Territories. In Victoria, the purchase of private land for incorporation into the parks and reserves system assists in the protection of some of the State's most endangered ecosystems. This article outlines the ecological attributes of private land purchased for addition to the Victorian public protected area system in 2006 and 2007. (*The Victorian Naturalist* 125 (5), 2008, 140-149)

Introduction

This article documents some of the more significant land purchases made by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) for addition to the public conservation estate from early 2006 until late 2007, and provides a brief description of their ecological attributes. It serves as an extension to previous descriptions of the operation of the Department's Conservation Land Purchase Program in Victoria (see Fitzsimons and Ashe 2003, Fitzsimons *et al.* 2004, 2006). The program aims to systematically improve the comprehensiveness, adequacy, and representativeness (CAR) of the reserve system, with particular emphasis on high-quality examples of threatened and under-reserved ecosystems such as native grasslands and grassy woodlands. All acquisitions are on a completely voluntary basis. The program complements the work of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) (and its predecessors) on public land, and the Trust for Nature and other programs (e.g. BushTender, Land for Wildlife) seeking to protect biodiversity on private land.

Purchase priorities are derived from published and internal inventories of the most significant sites containing threatened ecosystems throughout Victoria and are assessed in relation to the comprehensive-

ness, adequacy and representativeness of the existing reserve system. The Department also purchases private land to link park and reserve areas and remove inliers in order to consolidate protected habitat and alleviate potential management problems. All purchases described in this paper are managed for the conservation of biodiversity by Parks Victoria – except Branxholme Nature Conservation Reserve, which will be managed by a committee of management.

The conservation status of all species listed in this paper are outlined in Appendix 1, while Appendix 2 lists communities listed under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG) protected by the new reserves. Fig. 1 indicates the location of recent purchases within Victoria.

1. Branxholme Swamp Scrub

This small property at Branxholme in the Victorian Volcanic Plain bioregion contains endangered Woolly Tea-tree *Leptospermum lanigerum*-dominated Swamp Scrub Ecological Vegetation Class (EVC). There is a strong presence of the FFG-listed Curly Sedge *Carex tasmanica*. The site is associated with Arrandoovong Creek where native fish species such as Shortfin Eel *Anguilla australis*, River Blackfish *Gadopsis marmoratus*, Common Galaxias *Galaxias maculatus*, Mountain Galaxias *G. olidus* and Southern Pigmy Perch



Fig. 1. Location of recent land purchases (numbered) for addition to the reserve system (existing reserve system shaded).

Nannoperca australis have been recorded directly adjacent to the purchased land.

It has been added to the adjoining public land to form the new three hectare Branxholme Nature Conservation Reserve.

2. Ecklin South Swamp

The purchase of the 35 ha Ecklin South Swamp, near Timboon, protects a range of vegetation classes in the Victorian Volcanic Plain bioregion, a national biodiversity hotspot. Deep Freshwater Marshes are considered endangered in the bioregion, having been reduced to less than 30% of their original extent and facing ongoing threats to their viability. Fringing vegetation communities, including Swamp Scrub, Damp Heath Scrub and Scoria Cone Woodland EVCs, also are considered endangered or vulnerable in the bioregion.

Ecklin South Swamp has formed in a peat-filled crater that is partly drained (Fig. 2) (see Gill (1947) for a description of the formation of Ecklin Swamp and Ecklin Hill to the north). The swamp provides a breeding area for a number of species of waterbirds. It is the largest remaining permanent wetland in the region and it provides a refuge for waterfowl during pro-

longed periods of drought. Ecklin South Swamp is a nationally significant wetland listed under the *Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia* (Environment Australia 2001), as part of the Cobden-Terang Volcanic Craters (it is known as 'Bailey's Swamp' or 'Ecklin Swamp' in various versions of the Directory).

The Woolly Tea-tree-dominated Swamp Scrub provides likely habitat for the nationally-vulnerable Swamp Greenhood *Pterostylis tenuissima* and Small Sickle Greenhood *Pterostylis* sp. aff. *furcata* (endangered in Victoria).

The swamp protects important and permanent habitat of the nationally-vulnerable Growling Grass Frog *Litoria reniformis*, and the populations present at this site may be important for recolonisation of adjacent sites following population declines or extinctions. A number of vulnerable waterbird species, including Australasian Shoveller *Anas rhynchos*, Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*, Hardhead *Aythya australis* and Musk Duck *Biziura lobata* have been recorded using the swamp.

The new reserve is known as the Ecklin South Swamp Nature Conservation Reserve.

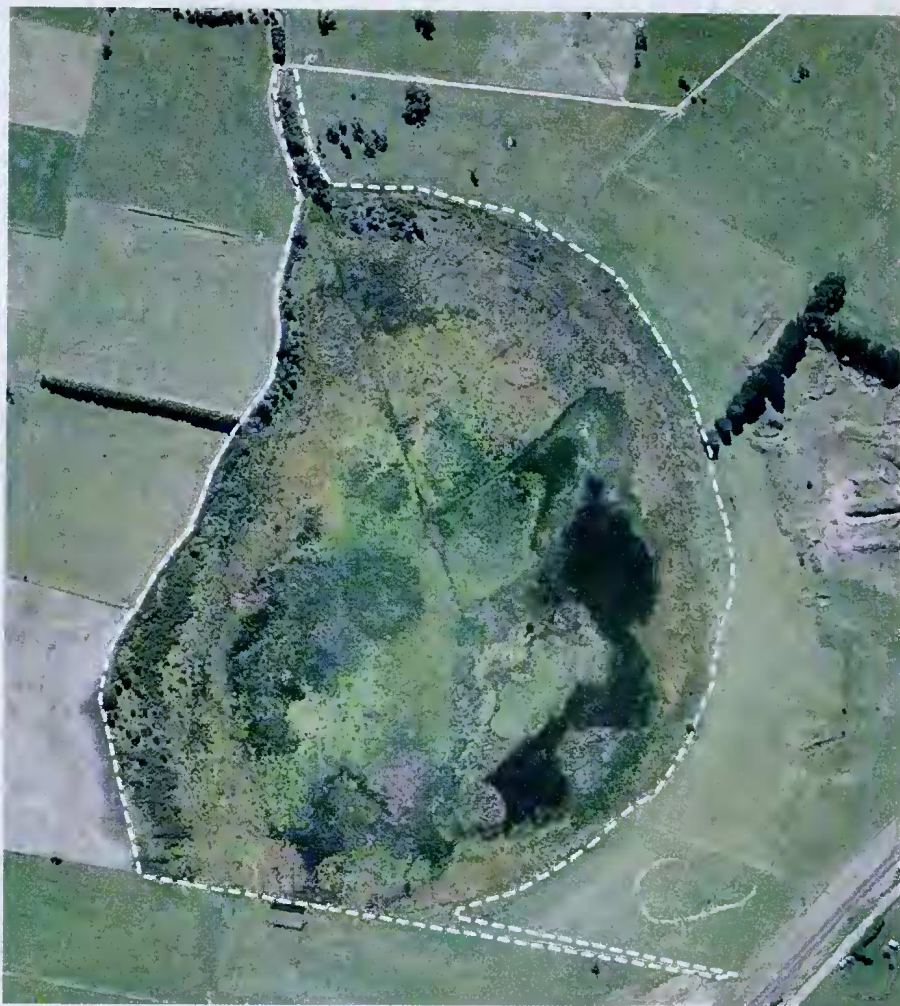


Fig. 2. Aerial photograph (2003) of Ecklin South Swamp. The dashed white line represents the reserve boundary. Source: DSE.

3. Warrak Herb-rich Woodlands, Langi Ghiran

This 42 ha addition to the north-east boundary of Langi Ghiran State Park contains mostly Hills Herb-rich Woodland, a vulnerable EVC in the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion. A small amount of endangered Damp Sands Herb-rich Woodland is also present, while the depleted Grassy Dry Forest makes up the remainder.

4. Korrak Korrak Grasslands

This 130 ha high quality Chenopod Grassland and Riverine Chenopod Wood-

land at Korrak Korrak was purchased in 2006 to form the new Korrak Korrak Nature Conservation Reserve (Figs. 3 and 4). Chenopod Grassland, which is endangered in the Victorian Riverina bioregion, occupies approximately 107 ha of the property, while the vulnerable Riverine Chenopod Woodland occurs on the remaining 23 ha.

The highly diverse site contains a number of significant flora species, including only the second Victorian record of the bindweed *Convolvulus graminetinus*, populations of the nationally vulnerable Chariot Wheels



Fig. 3. Mix of species in the Korrak Korrak grasslands, including Golden Sunray *Hyalosperma glutinosum* subsp. *glutinosum*, Hairy Bluebush *Maireana pentagona*, Paper Sunray *Rhodanthe corymbiflora*, Short-wing Saltbush *Sclerochlamys brachyptera* and Stiff Cup-flower *Pogonolepis muelleriana*. Photo: James Fitzsimons.

Maireana cheelii, as well as Leafless Bluebush *M. aphylla*, Rohrlach's Bluebush *M. rohrlachii*, Cane Grass *Eragrostis australasica*, and Smooth Minuria *Minuria integerrima*. Pale Spike-sedge *Eleocharis pallens* is known from adjoining grasslands. The site has been considered a high priority for purchase by DSE for a number of years. Its purchase complements other purchases of native grassland for conservation at Korrak Korrak and nearby Budgerum by the Trust for Nature (O'Brien 2004; Trust for Nature 2007).

In 2008 the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council recommended the adjoining public land along Back Creek be added to Korrak Korrak Nature Conservation Reserve to form a larger reserve of some 273 ha (VEAC 2008). This Black Box *Eucalyptus largiflorens* and Tangled Lignum *Muehlenbeckia florulenta* creek-line links to the Trust for Nature owned Korrak Korrak Grasslands Reserve and eventually to Yassom Swamp to the north (the latter recommended by VEAC (2008)

to be incorporated into a new Leaghur-Koorangie National Park).

5. Roslynmead East Grasslands, Patho Plains

The addition of 122 ha of endangered Northern Plains Grassland and Lignum Wetland to the reserve system complements other recent purchases by DSE and the Trust for Nature on the Patho Plains that have sought to increase the protection of grasslands in one of the largest areas remaining in Victoria (see Fitzsimons and Ashe 2003, Fitzsimons *et al.* 2004, 2006). The site is of very high significance due to the lack of cultivation and long-term light grazing regime. There has been virtually no mechanical disturbance over 80% of the property, with a small section cropped approximately 30 or more years ago.

The grassland is likely to provide habitat for Plains-wanderer *Pedionomus torquatus*, with a population recently recorded from the nearby Kotta Nature Conservation Reserve. Baker-Gabb (2001) indi-



Fig. 4. Grassland and Black Box woodland on Korrak Korrak Nature Conservation Reserve. Photo: Deanna Marshall.

cated that all suitable native grasslands within a 40 km radius of Terrick Terrick National Park play a key role in conserving this nationally vulnerable species. The grassland also provides habitat for a number of other significant fauna species recorded in nearby native grasslands, such as Curl Snake *Suta suta* and Fat-tailed Dunnart *Sminthopsis crassicaudata*.

The scattered Umbrella Wattle *Acacia oswaldii* have all died over the past 30 years – possibly due to the effects of grazing on recruitment. Significant flora species that have been recorded on the site include Red Swainson-pea *Swainsona plagiotropis*, Silky Swainson-pea *S. sericea*, Frosted Goosefoot *Chenopodium desertorum* subsp. *viosum* and Leafless Bluebush, while a number of other species occurring on nearby native grasslands are likely to occur here (e.g. Slender Darling-pea *S. murrayana*, Downy Swainson-pea *S. swainsonioides* and Woolly Mantle *Eriochlamys behrii*).

The new reserve is known as the Roslynmead East Nature Conservation Reserve and has recently been recommend-

ed for inclusion in an expanded Terrick Terrick National Park (VEAC 2008).

6. Neilborough Whipstick

This 130 ha property at Blandfords Road, Neilborough, is an inlier within the Greater Bendigo National Park and has been purchased for addition to this park. It comprises areas of remnant Sandstone Ridge Shrubland and Box-Ironbark Forest with large old Red Ironbark *Eucalyptus tricarpa*, as well as stands of the rare Kamarooka Mallee *E. froggattii* and a variety of orchid species. An area that appears to have been historically cleared is recovering well with a high cover of Wallaby Grass *Austrodanthonia* sp. and scattered Drooping Cassinia *Cassinia arcuata* and Whirrakee Wattle *Acacia williamsonii*. There are two drainage lines through the mallee with medium sized Yellow Gums *Eucalyptus leucoxydon*, a vegetation type that provides potentially suitable habitat for the nationally endangered Whipstick *Westringia Westringia crassifolia*.

This addition complements 163 ha of land, which as a result of vegetation off-

sets, has recently been added to the Whipstick and Kamarooka sections of the Greater Bendigo National Park.

7. Welsh Village, Chewton

This 9.2 ha property near Chewton was purchased for its historic and cultural values, namely as part of the former Welsh Village, and includes a late 19th century quartz gold mine. The site contains Heathy Dry Forest with large trees and an understorey in good condition. The site will be added to the adjoining Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park.

8. Holylands Swamp, Caniambo South

This 129 ha property at Caniambo South, south-east of Shepparton, contains remnants of two endangered EVCs, and includes the bioregionally significant Holylands Swamp (Fig. 5). The remnant vegetation on the property represents one of the largest patches of native vegetation left in the Sheep Pen Creek district. Occurring on the riverine plain, it has a natural drainage line that flows through the property and links Holylands Swamp with other wetlands in the district. There are relatively few wetlands in the Victorian Riverina bioregion reserved in strict nature conservation reserves (Robertson and Fitzsimons 2005).

The Red Gum Swamp EVC is dominated by River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* of all age classes, but with large numbers of mature trees. The wetland habitat ranges from open wetlands to tree-dominated swamps. The groundcover is dominated by Brown-back Wallaby-grass

Austrodanthonia duttoniana, Swamp Wallaby-grass *Amphibromus* sp., rushes *Juncus* sp. and Common Spike-sedge *Eleocharis acuta*. The Plains Grassy Woodland EVC is mostly cleared, apart from scattered, mature Grey Box *Eucalyptus microcarpa*.

Considering the size of the site, restoration of the mostly cleared Plains Grassy Woodland EVC should assist with the conservation of the Grey-crowned Babbler *Pomatostomus temporalis*, an endangered species whose stronghold in north-east Victoria is the Sheep Pen Creek district (Robinson 2006).

The new reserve is known as the Caniambo South Nature Conservation Reserve.

9. Rainbow Gully, Olinda

This 21 ha property represents a relatively large inlier within the Dandenong Ranges National Park. The land has over 60% cover of native Shrubby Foothill Forest, Wet Forest and Damp Forest, including Mountain Ash *Eucalyptus regnans*, Mountain Grey Gum *E. cypellocarpa*, Narrow-leaf Peppermint *E. radiata*, Messmate Stringybark *E. obliqua* and deep fern gullies. The purchase of this block for addition to the Dandenong Ranges National Park consolidates the park and removes a number of potential threats.

10. 'Grassy Swamp', French Island

The addition of the 27 ha 'Grassy Swamp' to the French Island National Park adds a grassy wetland community not previously represented in the park. The intact



Fig. 5. Holylands Swamp, Caniambo South Nature Conservation Reserve. Photo: Lance Williams.

ephemeral swamp includes large mosaics of sedges, rushes and other aquatic vegetation, including native grasses such as *Agrostis*, *Deyeuxia*, *Danthonia* and *Microlaena*, which dominate large areas of the block. Areas of Swamp Scrub (an endangered EVC) and Wet Heathland occur around the swamp margin. The swamp fills from drainage lines within the park connected to the Heifer, Little Heifer and Prairie Swamps system.

The swamp provides seasonal open water and important habitat for migratory waders and the critically endangered Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophema chrysogaster*, as well as other significant species such as Blue-winged Parrot *N. chrysostoma* and King Quail *Excalfactoria chinensis victoricae*. French Island is considered the most important area in Victoria for the latter endangered species (O'Brien 2006).

11. Ben Winch Swamp, Holey Plains

This 178 ha property contains Ben Winch Swamp and surrounding ecosystems and was purchased for addition to the Holey Plains State Park, south of Rosedale (Fig. 6). Located in the Gippsland Plain bioregion, it contains threatened wetland ecosystems (deep freshwater marsh/sedge wetland), and vulnerable Lowland Forest, Riparian Scrub and Damp Sands Herb-rich Woodland EVCs. Ben Winch Swamp has been identified as a site of regional zoological and geological/geomorphological significance (Rosengren *et al.* 1981). The adjacent Holey Plains State Park has been classified as a site of national zoological and botanical significance (Mansergh and Norris 1982; Gullan *et al.* 1984).

This complex wetland is over 1500 metres long and lies in a broad valley eroded in Tertiary sediments. Unlike any other swamps or lakes in the Stradbroke-Holey Plains area, Ben Winch Swamp has prominent relict spits that extend from the southern shoreline and divide the basin into five segments (Rosengren *et al.* 1981). The vegetation is of very high quality and, despite disturbance to part of the wetland prior to 1998 (in the form of peat extraction), the area is rehabilitating well.

The property supports some of the westernmost examples of Coast Grey Box *Eucalyptus bosistoana* forests in good con-

dition, a community which is much reduced from its former range and with many remaining stands in poor condition.

The site also supports the nationally endangered Dwarf Kerraung *Rulingia prostrata*. Although now understood to be more widespread than previously thought, many of the sites are on private property and prone to degradation through grazing and weed encroachment (N. Walsh pers. comm. 2007). The importance of Ben Winch Swamp for this species is highlighted in the FFG Action Statement (James 2003). Other significant flora species recorded on the site include the nationally-vulnerable Wellington Mint-bush *Prostanthera galbraithiae* and a significant westerly range extension for the Slender Mat-rush *Lomandra confertifolia* subsp. *leptostachya* (N. Walsh pers. comm. 2007).

Surveys in the area have confirmed that the Lowland Forest and Heathy Woodland on the property are part of the territory of one or more Powerful Owls *Ninox strenua*. In addition, a recent record several kilometres to the west suggests that it is possible that the area is also used by the endangered Masked Owl *Tyto novaehollandiae*, which inhabits more open forests and woodlands and occurs on the forest-cleared land interface, both of which are present at Ben Winch Swamp (R Willig pers. comm. 2007).

12. Bengworden Grassy Woodlands

This 106 ha property at Bengworden, west of Bairnsdale, contains a number of endangered grassy ecosystems of very high conservation significance. The vegetation is dominated by Plains Grassy Woodland (specifically, the FFG-listed Forest Red Gum Grassy Woodland; see front page), with smaller areas of the endangered Plains Grassy Wetland and vulnerable Damp Sands Herb-rich Woodland. Its purchase improves the conservation of these threatened EVCs within the Gippsland Plains bioregion. The vegetation is of high quality with limited areas of disturbance, consistent with a history of grazing with no attempt to establish introduced pasture. The site is considered one of the highest quality examples of known remnants of Plains Grassy Woodland on the Gippsland Plains, after Mooramong Flora and Fauna



Fig 6. Ben Winch Swamp and fringing vegetation. Photo: Melissa Ainsworth.

Reserve to the north (R Edwards pers. comm. 2007).

The rare Bear's-ear *Cymbonotus lawsonianus* has been recorded on the property. No fauna surveys have been undertaken to date.

This purchase enhances landscape connectivity and habitat linkages with areas of Plains Grassy Woodland covenanted with Trust for Nature on adjoining and nearby properties, and contributes to the Gippsland Plains Conservation Management Network (Fitzsimons and Wescott 2005).

The new reserve is known as the Bengworden Nature Conservation Reserve.

Other purchases

Two properties containing Wet Forest and Damp Forest EVCs totalling 30 ha at Kinglake and St Andrews North have been added to the Kinglake National Park to rationalise park boundaries. A small area (0.8 ha) of Chenopod Shrubland was added to the existing Winlaton Nature Conservation Reserve purchased in 2004 (see Fitzsimons *et al.* 2006)

Future directions for land purchase and the protected area system

Such strategic acquisitions, combined with other instruments to protect ecosystems on

private land, ultimately aim to improve the completeness, adequacy and representativeness of Victoria's protected area system. The funding and negotiation for purchase of other poorly represented ecosystems is currently in progress. Particular emphasis is on native grasslands and grassy woodlands. The Department's efforts are complemented by those of the Trust for Nature (Victoria) which has purchased and continues to purchase properties containing grassy and other threatened ecosystems throughout the State as part of the National Reserve System Program. Increasingly, creative solutions are being sought between DSE and the Trust to secure important conservation lands (see Fitzsimons and Davies 2005).

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these properties have ensured the maintenance of these remnants. Many of the past owners still have a strong connection to the new protected areas. The Commonwealth Government, through the National Reserve System Program of the Natural Heritage Trust, provided funding for the purchase of a number of these properties.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Some species occurring (or likely to occur) on recently purchased land (and their conservation status). Abbreviations: (Victorian Status) ce, critically endangered; e, endangered; v, vulnerable; r, rare; n, near threatened; k, poorly known/data deficient; (FFG) L, listed under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*; (Commonwealth Status) CE, critically endangered; E, endangered; V, vulnerable. Derived from DSE (2005, 2007), *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Note: This table does not represent all species occurring in the above-mentioned reserves.

| | Scientific Name | Common Name | Vic Status | FFG | Cwlth Status |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------|------------|-----|--------------|
| Mammals | <i>Sminthopsis crassicaudata</i> | Fat-tailed Dunnart | k | | |
| Birds | <i>Anas rhynchos</i> | Australasian Shoveller | v | | |
| | <i>Aythya australis</i> | Hardhead | v | | |
| | <i>Biziura lobata</i> | Musk Duck | v | | |
| | <i>Excalfactoria chinensis victoriae</i> | King Quail | e | L | |
| | <i>Neophema chrysogaster</i> | Orange-bellied Parrot | ce | L | CE |
| | <i>Neophema chrysostoma</i> | Bluc-winged Parrot | | | |
| | <i>Ninox strenua</i> | Powerful Owl | | | |
| | <i>Pedionomus torquatus</i> | Plains-wanderer | ce | L | V |
| <i>Platalea regia</i> | Royal Spoonbill | v | | | |
| <i>Pomatostomus temporalis</i> | Grey-crowned Babbler | e | L | | |

Appendix 1. cont'd.

| | Scientific Name | Common Name | Vic Status | FFG | Cwlth Status |
|-------------------|---|--------------------------|------------|-----|--------------|
| | <i>Tyto novaehollandiae</i> | Masked Owl | e | L | |
| Reptiles | <i>Suta suta</i> | Curl Snake | | | |
| Amphibians | <i>Litoria raniformis</i> | Growling Grass Frog | e | L | V |
| Fishes | <i>Anguilla australis</i> | Shortfin Eel | | | |
| | <i>Galaxias maculatus</i> | Common Galaxias | | | |
| | <i>Galaxias olidus</i> | Mountain Galaxias | | L | |
| | <i>Gadopsis marmoratus</i> | River Blackfish | | | |
| | <i>Nannoperca australis</i> | Southern Pigmy Perch | | | |
| Plants | <i>Acacia oswaldii</i> | Umbrella Wattle | v | | |
| | <i>Acacia williamsonii</i> | Whirakee Wattle | r | | |
| | <i>Austrodanthonia duttoniana</i> | Brown-back Wallaby-grass | | | |
| | <i>Carex tasmanica</i> | Curly Sedge | v | L | V |
| | <i>Cassinia arcuata</i> | Drooping Cassinia | | | |
| | <i>Chenopodium desertorum</i> subsp. <i>virosum</i> | Frosted Goosefoot | k | | |
| | <i>Convolvulus graminetinus</i> | Bindweed | | | |
| | <i>Cymbonotus lawsonianus</i> | Bear's-ear | r | | |
| | <i>Eleocharis acuta</i> | Common Spike-sedge | | | |
| | <i>Eleocharis pallens</i> | Pale Spike-sedge | k | | |
| | <i>Eragrostis australasica</i> | Cane Grass | v | | |
| | <i>Eriochlamys behrii</i> | Woolly Mantle | r | | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus bosistoana</i> | Coast Grey Box | r | | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus camaldulensis</i> | River Red Gum | | | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus froggattii</i> | Kamarooka Mallee | r | L | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus largiflorens</i> | Black Box | | | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus leucoxyton</i> | Yellow Gum | | | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus microcarpa</i> | Grey Box | | | |
| | <i>Eucalyptus tricarpa</i> | Red Ironbark | | | |
| | <i>Hyalosperma glutinosum</i> subsp. <i>glutinosum</i> | Golden Sunray | | | |
| | <i>Leptospermum lanigerum</i> | Woolly Tea-tree | | | |
| | <i>Lomandra confertifolia</i> subsp. <i>leptostachya</i> | Slender Mat-rush | | | |
| | <i>Maireana aphylla</i> | Leafless Bluebush | k | | |
| | <i>Maireana cheelii</i> | Chariot Wheels | v | N | V |
| | <i>Maireana pentagona</i> | Hairy Bluebush | | | |
| | <i>Maireana rohrlachii</i> | Rohrlach's Bluebush | k | | |
| | <i>Minuria integerrima</i> | Smooth Minuria | r | | |
| | <i>Muehlenbeckia florulenta</i> | Tangled Lignum | | | |
| | <i>Pogonolepis muelleriana</i> | Stiff Cup-flower | | | |
| | <i>Prostanthera galbraithiae</i> | Wellington Mint-bush | v | N | L |
| | <i>Pterostylis</i> sp. aff. <i>furcata</i> | Small Sickle Greenhood | e | | |
| | <i>Pterostylis tenuissima</i> | Swamp Greenhood | v | | V |
| | <i>Rhodanthe corymbiflora</i> | Paper Sunray | | | |
| | <i>Rulingia prostrata</i> | Dwarf Kerrawang | e | L | E |
| | <i>Sclerochlamys brachyptera</i> | Short-wing Saltbush | | | |
| | <i>Swainsona murrayana</i> | Slender Darling-pea | e | L | V |
| | <i>Swainsona plagiotropis</i> | Red Swainson-pea | e | L | V |
| | <i>Swainsona sericea</i> | Silky Swainson-pea | v | | |
| | <i>Swainsona swainsonioides</i> | Downy Swainson-pea | e | L | |
| | <i>Westringia crassifolia</i> | Whipstick Westringia | e | L | E |

Appendix 2. Some listed *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* communities occurring on recently purchased land.

Northern Plains Grassland
Forest Red Gum Grassy Woodland

Victorian temperate-woodland bird community